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AGAINST AGGRESSIVE MUNDANENESS
Why Democrats' Message Failed In The 2022 Midterms, and
The Corporate Crackdown That Could Save Them

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Introduction

The Democratic Party's losses in the 2022 midterms were not inevitable.

Over the summer, a string of news cycles revived support for Democrats after the collapse of the Build Back Better Act. First the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, then Congress passed the Inflation Reduction Act, and later President Biden issued popular executive orders. After these stories faded from the headlines, however, the public turned away from Democrats in the polls.

This speaks to how *reactive* Democratic candidates were in this cycle. The national party failed to project a clear *proactive* message for why voters should *want* to vote for Democrats, what they would stand to *gain* from it, and how *committed* Democrats were to such promises. While Americans widely believe that the country is on the [wrong track](#), Democrats never assigned the blame for that feeling onto any specific individuals, corporations, or social forces, nor followed up any assignment of blame with actions to demonstrate their commitment to opposing these forces, utilizing their control of Congress and the executive branch.

Democrats rightly castigated Republican hostility to democratic norms in this cycle, but supporting the broad concept of electoral democracy and proving that Democrats will protect and expand it are two different things, particularly in the face of severe hostility from Republicans with whom many Democrats want to maintain collegial relationships. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt [once put it](#): “Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations not because the people of those nations disliked democracy, but because they had grown tired of unemployment and insecurity [...] Finally, in desperation, they chose to sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat.”

The closest thing to a clear proactive message from the Democratic Party in this cycle was a general sense that Democrats would protect reproductive rights. But the party never clearly committed to any earned-media strategy on the issue, such as holding Congressional votes on abortion policies after Labor Day. The public could intuit that Democrats opposed the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, but could neither tell what exactly Democrats planned to do about it, nor how committed Democrats were to such a strategy when the going inevitably got tough in politics.

The New Yorker's Nicholas Lemann [described](#) swing seat Democrats' 2022 message as one of “aggressive mundaneness,” in which vulnerable incumbents focused on trying to carve out a local brand and personal image that was meaningfully different from the Democratic Party's writ large. This memo argues that was the wrong strategy. We assert that swing-seat Democrats' biggest messaging problem in 2022 was their frequent lack of a clearly-defined enemy to stand against in the public imagination, especially regarding the economy. Without a villain being



discussed outside of paid ads, which voters seek to tune out, Democrats fell into the reactivity that doomed them once their string of lucky news cycles broke.

Brian Beutler of Crooked Media [argued similarly](#) on Friday, November 4 that Democrats need “the special sauce that *attracts* cameras instead of playing for ones that happen to be rolling. [...] these kinds of feeding frenzies have swung multiple elections in the past several cycles, which means failing to manufacture them (or refusing to try) comes at a very high cost, irrespective of how good the party’s ads and speeches are.”

We argue that a more aggressive message would be to pursue what the Revolving Door Project has called a “[Corporate Crackdown](#),” attacking corporate malfeasance with the full force of the federal government, relentlessly messaging that Democrats fight bad corporate actors, and uplifting citizens who strike back against corporate power, especially through strong unions.

This message is [overwhelmingly popular](#) with both Democratic and Republican-leaning voters; it allows Democrats to create news events via the levers of power they already control; and it establishes a clear contrast with Republicans, who talk a big game about taking on corporate power, but never actually do so. Most importantly, it would establish a clear enemy who is unpopular across the Democratic coalition for Democratic candidates to stand firmly against.

Note: *This memo is focused on overall messaging guidance. We do not opine on 2022 Democratic campaigns’ ground game/field strategies, an indispensable part of campaigning which other organizations are better suited to analyze than ourselves.*



What Was Wrong With The Party's Message

- **The most vulnerable Democrats were moderates trying to appeal to both non-college working-class voters and better educated, more socially liberal voters. They settled on a message of “aggressive mundaneness.”**
 - In [a deeply reported story](#) on the most vulnerable Democratic Senate incumbents, *The New Yorker's* Nicholas Lemann argued that Democrats are caught between appeals to the “traditional, working-class base” and “affluent, educated, socially liberal voters.”
 - To keep both blocs in coalition with each other, according to Lemann, Democrats in competitive races pushed messages characterized by “aggressive mundaneness:” that Democrats would improve schools and healthcare, avoid culture-war distractions, and represent their communities.
- **“Aggressive mundaneness” does not capture people’s attention. Conflict captures national headlines. Social media algorithms don’t lift up the mundane.**
 - The Democrats profiled by Lemann have not been at the center of the national political conversation. Only voters highly involved in politics are likely to have consumed enough information about Catherine Cortez-Masto and Maggie Hassan, or other struggling moderates like Michael Bennet, to meaningfully understand who they are separate from their roles as Democrats.
 - If these candidates want to capture the attention that could mobilize voters, attract funders, and entice volunteers for their campaign, they need a story to tell that compels interest in fights that potential Democratic voters want to have and which Democratic leaders can win. The root of all storytelling is conflict.
- **In our nationally-polarized politics of 2022, what’s happening in the national headlines is crucial to Democrats locally.**
 - The two major American political parties are more polarized than ever before. Much of this is negative polarization — one of the main reasons people turn out to vote is not to affirm their individual support for a given candidate, but to prevent the party they disfavor from gaining more power.
 - Voters split their ballots less than ever, implying that they vote less based on support for individual candidates, and more based on party alignment.
 - Most Americans do not know who their elected representatives are. They do know, however, how their state tends to vote, and which party tends to share their beliefs, and which one they associate with social forces they dislike.



- In this political environment, a swing seat candidate's efforts to fully differentiate themselves from the national brand will be mostly fruitless. To the vast majority of voters, they will be associated with everything associated with their party.
 - The exceptions, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, prove the rule. The only way Manchin and Sinema have been able to carve out reputations as Democrats who differ from the party orthodoxy is by getting the national media to relentlessly cover their difference, usually through costly stunts that decimated their co-partisans' credibility and hurt the party's overall electoral chances (e.g., killing Build Back Better while perpetuating "Democrats in Disarray" as the national story).
- The decline of local journalism means that Americans access less information about their personal elected representatives. Thus, there is even less probability of a local official developing a local brand so strong that voters meaningfully distinguish them from the national Democratic Party, and its associated concepts.
- Tellingly, [a Washington Post analysis](#) of campaign ads found that Democrats spent *one-tenth* of what Republicans did on ads criticizing national figures. While paid ads have limitations on their utility, they are an excellent indicator of the message Democrats *want* to present, and that message did not resonate.
 - As of October 25th, Republicans had spent \$81 million on ads derogating President Joe Biden and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, while Democrats had spent just \$8 million on ads attacking former President Donald Trump.
 - Republicans spent \$50 million on ads featuring Trump in a positive light. That means Republicans spent *more than four times* what Democrats did on ads featuring Trump, despite his net approval rating hovering between -10% and -15% for over a year, [according to FiveThirtyEight](#).
- **Republicans, who keep beating better Democratic candidates, do not run "aggressively mundane" campaigns.**
 - Republicans gloried in creating conflict. Republican fear-mongering about crime, immigration, antiracism education, LGBTQ culture, and more generated conflict, and thus, coverage. This harms Democrats electorally, but much more importantly, makes marginalized Americans much less safe.
 - Election results can be a matter of personal safety to marginalized Americans, so Democratic failure to directly fight the forces threatening these Americans' security is both dangerous and demobilizing.
 - Democrats need to generate conflict to avoid ceding the stage to Republicans. They could have done so with votes and executive actions instead of xenophobic publicity stunts (i.e. busing unknowing migrants to Martha's Vineyard.) And instead of vilifying the most vulnerable and least culpable, the Democratic narrative could have focused on the actual elites eroding American society.



What Should Democrats Have Said Instead

- **“Aggressive mundaneness” is not the only way to keep working-class voters and educated liberal voters in coalition together. These blocs share common enemies. Democrats should have campaigned against the forces both blocs despise.**
 - The main supposed advantage of “aggressive mundaneness” is that making no enemies means alienating no potential allies. But if a candidate never stands up to anything, they effectively stand *for* nothing, and *all* voters will rightly find them untrustworthy at worst, and boring at best. If you never stand against anything, that means you have no principles.
 - The challenge, then, is to make enemies who both working-class voters and educated socially-liberal voters dislike, and to credibly stand up to them. The good news is that these blocs share many enemies — especially economic predators such as Wall Street and Big Pharma.
- **Both working-class voters and educated liberal voters strongly support unions, because unions are inherently oppositional to the forces they both oppose.**
 - Unions have always been one of the greatest drivers of both working-class prosperity *and* [broad social tolerance](#) in America. Today’s unionization movement to organize service-industry jobs is largely led by college-educated employees. Unions unite these blocs in the short- and long-term.
 - States with voter suppression laws are [often states with low union density](#). Unions are one of the best ways in which Americans practice democracy and come to appreciate democratic norms.
 - Not every college graduate enters the upper classes, and not every non-college graduate is socially conservative.
- **Candidates can be kind while still antagonizing the forces harming American life.**
 - “Aggressive mundaneness” also supposedly allows politicians to prove that they are friendly and practical, rather than divisive and angry. But being friendly does not require being unprincipled.
 - Disliking the divisiveness in America today is not the same thing as believing that divisiveness isn’t justified. Voters aren’t volunteering which of their deeply-held values they’d give up to make society a bit less mean.
 - Biden himself won in 2020 by fusing his human decency with opposition to Donald Trump’s bigotry. He was unwilling to compromise with Trump, but wanted to promote decency in society. ***That message leaves open the door for compromise with people who share your fundamental values, but makes clear what those values are.***



What Would Have Helped Democrats Win, And Was Within Their Control To Do

- **Congress should have voted on big messaging bills in October.**
 - If abortion was beginning to fade from the national news by October, why didn't Congressional Democratic leadership schedule a vote on a bill codifying *Roe*?
 - Better yet, why didn't Democrats vote on a Constitutional amendment granting an explicit right to privacy? Such an amendment would guarantee abortion rights, same-sex and interracial marriage, contraceptive access, and more in one fell swoop.
 - If Democrats worry that abortion alienates some voters, then granting *all* voters a broad, popular right to privacy gives everyone new privileges to enjoy, and alienates unpopular Big Tech companies, who surveil the public and intrude on privacy, in the process.
 - The Senate spent just 45%, and the House just 26%, of the [2021](#) and [2022](#) calendars in session. If Congress had so much time off in part to campaign, it did not yield significant boosts to Democratic support.
 - Congress failed to complete all of its essential business in this session, [including confirming executive branch nominees](#).
 - House rules allow members to vote remotely, and Senate Majority Leader Schumer could have scheduled Senate votes to allow members to go back and forth from Washington at the end of the campaign season.
 - The Senate was not in session in October, giving Democratic incumbents free rein to campaign in their states. Did any incumbent Democratic Senator emerge from their month of recess in a stronger position than when they entered it?
 - Democrats sought to mobilize support around protecting the right to abortion. But as Republicans tried to distance themselves from abortion as an issue, Democrats did nothing to prove that, when forced to, Republicans will vote against providing and protecting reproductive rights. It was perfectly within Democrats' power to schedule a floor vote and force Republican incumbents to show the world where their ultimate loyalty lies.
- **The Executive Branch should directly attack corporations and white nationalists. Biden should relentlessly castigate bad corporate actors. Departments and agencies should investigate and prosecute bad actors as publicly as possible.**
 - In January, the Revolving Door Project [made its case](#) for Biden to initiate a "Corporate Crackdown" through his executive branch powers, in order to turn around his then-flagging poll numbers.



- We followed this up with detailed reports on potential actions at the [Labor Department and labor regulatory agencies](#); the [Transportation and Commerce Departments](#); and a [whole-of-government “Climate Corporate Crackdown” plan](#).
- We also conducted [polling](#) showing that our “Corporate Crackdown” framework was overwhelmingly popular with both Democratic and Republican-leaning voters. The American public, across partisan lines, wants to see bad corporate actors brought to heel by the executive state.
- **Democratic leadership should have attacked the unpopular enemies responsible for lingering inflation. Democratic influencers should have delegitimized anyone who protected these villains while claiming to speak for the party.**
 - Two of the most harmful factors for Democratic credibility on inflation were White House economists’ insistence that it would come down before the election, and non-White House economists who are still prominent Democrats inveighing against the White House publicly for months.
 - When commentators [falsely](#) blamed the American Rescue Plan for most of American inflation, Democrats should have highlighted that US inflation has been equal or lower than rates in the EU, which had a much smaller fiscal stimulus. Democrats then could have appropriately blamed supply chains and [platform monopoly abuses](#) for inflation, [voted on anti-price gouging bills](#) and attacked the corporate lobbyists [defending big business’ price-gouging](#).
 - One of the administration’s strongest anti-inflationary actions — [which yielded an excellent news cycle](#) — attacked price-gouging in the meatpacking industry. The Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission could pursue similar investigations into [residential rents](#), for instance, if they had more staff.



Conclusion

When Democrats consider how to appeal to cross-pressured swing voters, or Democratic-leaning people who may lack motivation to vote, they tend to be tactically passive. They lean on messages shaped by polls which assume an audience paying attention to politics, and thus are typically blandly inoffensive. They then hope their opponents' horrifying beliefs are enough to motivate voters to turn out for candidates who don't offer clear benefits to the electorate. Even when these candidates do make promises, they often lack credibility — for instance, claiming to fight inflation without holding votes on a clear anti-inflationary plan. Voters have little reason to believe these Democrats will follow through on their promises and fight hard for the people when the going inevitably gets tough in politics.

Since 2016, this strategy of “aggressive mundaneness” has consistently proven to be ineffective at preventing Trumpist authoritarians from seizing power. Democrats must show what they are for by *proving* what they are against. The party must show that it is hostile to the same social forces as its voters; must offer clear promises to those voters; and must credibly show that it will follow through on those promises by wielding power to their benefit when it is elected.

We believe that the politics of conflict would allow the party to compel attention to battles on terrain where the party is more popular, be it populist economics or civil liberties. When the stakes are this high, “aggressive mundaneness” is unacceptable. It is past time for the Democratic Party to stand up for its people, and stand against what oppresses them.

Further Resources

[“What Biden’s Message Should Be”](#) | Democracy Journal, Jeff Hauser and Max Moran, 1/13/22

[“How Governing Can Motivate Politics”](#) | American Prospect, Dorothy Slater and Toni Aguilar Rosenthal, 10/31/22

[“Corporate Crackdown Project — Climate”](#) | Revolving Door Project white paper, Moran et al, 9/5/22

[“The Do-Nothing Discipline”](#) | The Baffler, Jeff Hauser, March 2018

